

Brass Bars

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The sky was blue, and the sun an astigmatically fixated boiling steam iron behind my shoulder, and my wife was late. Ten minutes. So I read *The L.A. Times* and counted funerals classified while cars honked and women howled.

My coat hung heavy like hot gold chains, my wife's wedding band, wrapped across my chest and around my waist tight. So I took it off and laid it on my leather briefcase against the bench. I loosened the tie Carol bought, then took it off and put it inside my genuine leather briefcase.

A mountain of silver mirror broke down in curving beams of heat against the cement sidewalk. Big black letters blew up like a large warning "P.T. Colossus Structured Insurance Unincorporated." Light stabbed against my eyes to blind me. Sweat hung on the air. A box screamed.

"What's in the box?" I asked the old woman whose large cardboard box rocked in her arms.

"Why, it's Harold." Her softface twinkled a computerized smile. The lines went hard. "Come closer and I'll let you meet him." I moved along the bench trying to avoid red gum. She untied the twine bow and lifted a small corner of flap. I moved closer and caught yellow glint. The cat cried. The woman pushed back the flap and started tying the bow up again.

"I don't think he likes being caged up like that."

"Well, I have to. Can't leave him at home alone." She hugged the box tight.

"I think it's rather cruel to keep him in that box. Doesn't seem like he could breathe." She turned red.

"But I have to keep him in . . . I can't leave him at my apartment. You . . . understand?"

"Understand?"

"I live in Hollywood. If I leave him there they'll get him."

"Come now, the mice aren't that big a problem." My poor joke slipped by and the old woman showed confusion. She became disoriented and no longer looked in my eyes. Her delicate hands fumbled with the box. Her voice cracked high.

"They come out as soon as I leave. They want to get him."

"I'm sorry, but I just don't understand what you're talking

about lady."

"Why, the communists! who else?" Her eyes bulged overfed balloons. I wanted to laugh.

"There's no communists." She sat stunned. Blood shot through her eyes.

"I . . . know . . . I . . . don't try to lie to me. You can't tell me I don't know . . . You! You're a communist." Her body shook as she stood up and faced me. She couldn't turn her back, not on me. She picked up the box and hurried off screaming about communists. A blue scarf bobbing among human islands. The box heavy, pulling her closer to the ground.

"And when you grow up we'll get you a small monkey like that, right mom?" Mom had her hand in dad's.

"Just as long as he keeps it in its cage, and cleans up after it."

"Would you like that Stevie?" I watched the monkey pick off the fleas from its baby and soon became disgusted with the whole idea. The monkeys were no longer my favorite animal in the zoo. I wanted to leave.

"No, it smells bad here. I wanna go home." I whined and my parents gave in. Tigers purred in slow monotone, almost helpless, growls; elephants bathed under plastic trunks; the bear wore a circular path on his square of earth; and the bird laid his head lethargically on his wing. I approved and we left. From the rear window of my dad's big car I waved goodbye to the zoo.

I stood up and walked behind the bench to stretch, and laced fingers against the back of my head and felt a knot. Suddenly I was pushed against the bench. My back in pain.

"Hey watch where you're going." I turned and the woman's face was blank. The shopping cart held brown wrinkled bags and torn dirt rags that resembled clothing of some sort.

"Dunt da dunt da da."

"I beg your pardon."

"Da da da da."

"I don't understand. I'm sorry. If it's the time you want walk over to the other side of the building and you'll find a clock at the top." I was tired of dealing with morons. She looked through me with eyes crystal blank. Her face dried mud and her hair held leaves.

"You remember me," she said softly. "Mother."

"No. I'm sorry, I'm not your mother." I backed away from her and moved to the other end of the bench. Her face broke into a big smile.

"You look so pretty mother . . . I'm so glad to be home." She pulled her shopping cart back and turned it around as if nothing had been said, or as if it had been said years earlier and never now. She pulled her black shaggy shawl higher on her shoulders and started to walk. Her bare feet like clubs. She babbled a chant that went somewhat like loneliness, and was gone. I imagined her throwing out untied anchors and sat down and closed my eyes.

"You'll work your way from the ground up," commanded P.T. with grey suit and block face. The same face Carol had inherited. "I'm afraid we don't play favorites here."

"Of course sir. Don't be afraid." That slipped past him and my nervousness remained in tact. He sat at his desk with thick glasses and stern calculation. The photographs of Judy and Carol stared at him from the corner of the desk.

"Why didn't she listen to me?" He bent his head and began to rub what must have been a horn.

"I am willing to accept any position you can offer me. You realize this involves your daughter." Somehow it felt like blackmail. His face set to stone and his eyes shot out like metal bars.

"Of course Steve, I must give you a chance. I love my daughter deeply." He studied my face hard then loudly said, "O.K. my boy you've got a job. I'm sticking you with the sales crew." He later took me out to buy some work clothes and my genuine leather briefcase. Carol was happy and her dad was happy. They both wore amused smiles.

"You'd look better without that beard. You don't really need it." I opened my eyes to shadow, then focused on the old man dressed in brown imitation leather pants and green shirt. His hair white, he beamed fluorescent computer terminal lights. No! he beamed sunlight. "Men with beards look like apes." His eyes sparked like an ignition . . . no, like diamonds deep within the earth.

"Listen old man, I really don't care what you think." His smile dripped mud. There was really no structure, just broken face.

"No wait . . . I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you. I just want to talk. My name's Jack." He held out a pale claw and I automatically handed him smooth perfect plastic. We shook. Me with precision, yet a gap was filled. "When I was a boy I worked on the farm my parents owned. We grew fields of turnips and when the season turned, it was my job to bring them up from the ground." He looked at me with eyes warm

like popcorn in a pan and smile buttery. His hair like salt. I was hungry.

"Damn my wife, she was supposed to pick me up over thirty minutes ago." The old man moved closer on my comment. He reminded me of the child who wanted to break all the locks.

"I used to be married but my wife died. I've got three kids. Now far away. Don't ever get old. Don't ever know." Eyes like yolk orbs slid on me. "You should be on billboards or something. You're perfect."

"Dad, do you think any of the girls will dance with me?"

"Of course. All of them will want to dance with you. That's the game of it, you just have to be careful." I looked in the mirror and cringed at the zit on my chin.

"But dad, I don't understand."

"Slowly one slides the neck of the bar in place and next thing you know it's locked."

"But dad, I don't understand."

No, regardless of my hunger. His face was still cracked like earth drying up after a storm. His smile dried wide.

"No, really, you should, I'm sure you're very popular. Women must have said things." I was amused. His smile cracked at the corners, bits of earth flying. "When I was young I was handsome."

"She's late. Very late this time." I said, while looking at my watch.

"Women," he snarled, "good for nothing." I wanted to cement his muddy face. Make it fit into place. Logical. "I'm now alone . . . I live in a cardboard box where they feed me sawdust." He paused for the cars revving their engines. Moving fast forward . . . fast. "I was once like you." I didn't move. Only listened. Recording information . . . the tape moved forward.

He came forward. "You're very handsome. I would like to be friends with you . . . good friends." He came closer. The tape ran out. I breathed alive and moved away with instrumental precision. Stepping out of the mud on a rainy day. "You're going to be like me, don't look at me like that, you're going to be just like me. You are me . . . I hope you like sawdust." I ignored him by looking at my watch. I thought about the small coiled springs, miniature levers, and the perfect metal workings. "You don't know yet. How can you." He put his claws on my arm. I shook, my walls too thin, wondering if I'd hold. I'd forgive her possibly, but now she

was an hour late.

"My wife will be here soon." Mud crumbled to dust, which thickened upon cement. I could only see cement. I wouldn't know any more.

"Yes," he sighed. "She will. I know she will." I stared at his shoes they were imitation leather. Raw imitation. Real? I lost my sense of structure for a moment. The images changed and wouldn't sit still, but only briefly. The old man patted my knee. I was calm. He moved away from me and sat back against the bench.

"Hey, doesn't anyone know when the bus is supposed to come?" His question was followed with a round of moos. He lit a cigarette then picked up *The L.A. Times* and turned to the funeral section. Carol drove up and unlocked the passenger side door. I smiled and jumped in my cage.